After half a century of automobile-based planning, Oklahoma City rebuilds its downtown to encourage walking and biking.

A 180° Turnaround

By Jeff Speck, AICP

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Fifth Street, now (left), and as it will look in the future with two traffic lanes, wide sidewalks, and street trees. The street leads to the Oklahoma City National Memorial.

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IN 2008, *PREVENTION* MAGAZINE named Oklahoma City the "least walkable city in America." While most other poorly ranked communities did nothing, Oklahoma City and its leading institutions responded to this wake-up call by committing to rebuild all the streets in the city's downtown core.

Prior circumstances were bleak. Most streets were multilane one-way thoroughfares, and many curbs had sacrificed their parallel parking for additional travel lanes. Bicycle facilities were nonexistent, and traffic sped too fast for bikes to share the road—or for pedestrians to feel comfortable on sidewalks—as oversized lanes encouraged highway speeds. Street trees were in short supply, and most intersections had overlong turning lanes, further discomfiting pedestrians.

All of this is changing. A predominantly one-way system is being replaced by a mostly two-way system, and many turning lanes are being eliminated. The Congress for the New Urbanism/Institute of Transportation Engineers standards for lane widths are being applied, significantly reducing design speeds. A comprehensive bicycle network is being built, with more than six miles of bike lanes. Several thousand street trees are being planted.

In addition, parallel parking slots are being bumped up by more than 800 spaces—all of them carved out of existing roadways. According to the National Main Street Center, each parking space removed from a street costs an adjacent business about $10,000 a year in sales. While that process won't work exactly the same in reverse, it is easy to see the likely benefit of turning excess driving lanes into hundreds of parking spaces. Converting the unneeded travel lanes into parking will also slow traffic while protecting currently exposed sidewalk edges from moving vehicles.

Perhaps most significantly, all of this is happening with the blessings of a conservative public works department, in a culture where the car is king. Unavoidably, this was as much a political effort as a design effort, in which the planners—this author included—had to overcome initial objections to pro-pedestrian proposals.

Project 180

Dubbed Project 180 in honor of its initial size—now closer to 220 acres—this undertaking is actually the result of two different stories that dovetailed just in time. By 2009, plans were already well under way for Devon Tower, a new 50-story, $750 million headquarters for Devon Energy, a major U.S. oil and gas producer. Devon's CEO Larry Nichols was determined that a nine-figure tax increment financing package be used to remake the 50 blocks of streets and parks surrounding the tower. Happily, these 50 blocks coincide with Oklahoma City's central business district. The city hired the Houston-based landscape architectural team of James Burnett, partnered with Murase Associates of Portland, to begin work.

Meanwhile, Mayor Mick Cornett, an ardent planning advocate, was determined to do something about his city's poor walkability ranking. In 2009, he brought in my firm, Speck & Associates, to do a walkability study that concluded, among other things, that many downtown streets were twice the size they needed to be for the traffic they actually handled. We recommended trading traffic lanes for parking and biking lanes, converting one-way streets to two-way, and replacing the current high-speed geometrics with the CNU-ITE standard.

After being presented to the full city council, the study caused a stir and made some enemies. But it also spurred a larger public discourse about livability and the community's hopes for its downtown, prominently covered by the local newspapers. Before long, Jim Burnett asked us to join his team.

Give and take

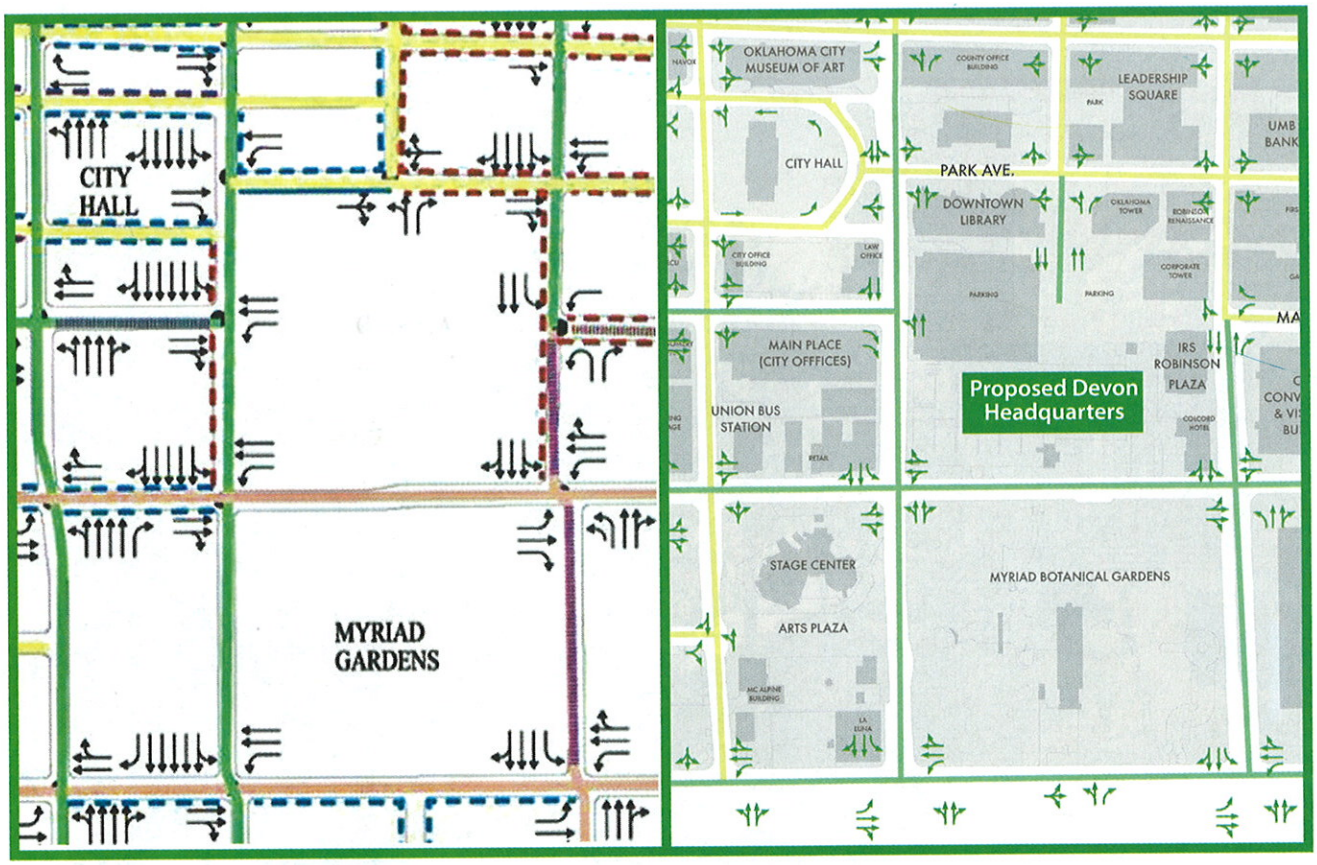
Initial resistance was to be expected, and the local transportation engineering consultant did not disappoint. Although the city's typical downtown street was a four-laner handling two lanes worth of traffic, we were told that our proposed changes would lead to gridlock. Burnett hired Glatting Jackson (since merged with AECOM) to produce a competing computer analysis, and the city eventually signed off on a slightly modified plan.

As noted, most of the planned improvements to walkability will happen between the curbs, with a focus on how vehicles affect pedestrians. But the landscape team took an equally innovative approach to the streetscape, which includes four electric charging stations, leading-edge accessible facilities, and a budget of more than $20 million for custom materials, plant selection, street furniture, and public art.

All that said, the project's most significant feature is that it is actually being built. A three-year, $90 million construction effort has begun and will be completed by January 2014.

"This is one of those 20-year overnight successes," says Russell Claus, AICP, a native of Brisbane, Australia, and Oklahoma City's planning director, who has been with the city since 1996. "It was a very long journey getting everyone to understand the value of public space in the downtown."

That journey's biggest steps have perhaps been taken by the public works department. "We have a much more cooperative relationship than before," Claus adds. "[Public works chief] Dennis Clowers has made it clear that planning has to set the vision for public works to follow, which is the opposite of how it was for a long time in this city."



A detail of downtown Oklahoma City as it looks today, with its many broad one-way streets (left) and as it will be when the plan is fully implemented (right).

It didn't hurt that city manager Jim Couch, a civil engineer, understood that traffic modeling studies are only as good as their inputs. And the proof is already evident: "The construction has effectively narrowed the streets beyond the planned amount without incident, and congestion levels are minimal," says Claus.

That explains the progressive design. The quick implementation got a push from some innovative financing. In an unusual TIF agreement, Devon Energy, whose enormous new headquarters is generating the tax increment, is the sole holder of the new bonds. Effectively, Devon has lent the city the full construction budget, which the city will then be able to pay back out of increased tax payments it receives from Devon.

In a sense, this is the old economy funding the new. "Project 180 showcases our efforts to create an overall cultural shift that reorients the city around people instead of cars," says Mayor Cornett, who celebrates walkability as a key to health. "The infrastructure that you offer your citizens both reflects and influences the lifestyles that they adopt."

Lessons apply to all

Efforts in less flush cities suggest that you don't need oil and gas deposits to make your downtown more walkable. Much has already been published about successful one-way reversions and road diets that have given new life to struggling cities from West Palm Beach, Florida, to Vancouver, Washington. These changes need not be expensive, as shown in recently completed walkability redesigns for Davenport, Iowa, and Lowell, Massachusetts; those redesigns rely almost exclusively on signals and paint and are budgeted at less than five percent of the Oklahoma City project.

Project 180 shows us how to spend a lot of money well on walkability, but since much of its impact takes place between the curbs, it is easy to see how restriping alone can produce powerful results. The 2009 walkability study for Oklahoma City presented the following 10-step approach to street redesign. Only the final item—street trees—is expensive:

- All one-way streets will be converted to two-way streets.
- Each street will have no more driving lanes than suggested by traffic volume.
- No driving lane will be more than 11 feet wide.
- No parallel parking lane will be more than eight feet wide.
- All right-hand turning lanes will be eliminated. Left-hand turning lanes will be no longer than required by typical rush-hour stacking.
- Angle parking will be used as a tool to absorb additional roadway made available by these requirements.
- Bicycle lanes will also be used as a tool to absorb the additional roadway made available by these requirements.
- On-street parking will be provided at every curb.
- Curb return radii will be limited to a maximum of 15 feet.
- Street trees will be planted continuously along streets at a spacing distance of 30 feet on center or less.

These 10 steps are available to all American cities, and applicable to most. That they are being implemented in one of the nation's most auto-centric regions says a lot about their potential elsewhere.

Jeff Speck is the principal of Speck & Associates in Washington, D.C. He is the former design director of the National Endowment for the Arts and is coauthor of *Suburban Nation* (2000, North Point Press) and *The Smart Growth Manual* (2010, McGraw Hill).